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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 SUVA 000153

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SUBJECT: FIJI CHIEFS PLEAD FOR FOREIGN HELP

REF: SUVA 145

Classified By: Amb. Dinger. Sec. 1.4 (B,D).

Summary

1. (C) Embassy Suva has received a hand-delivered "private and confidential" letter from the highest chiefs of Fiji laying out a series of complaints against interim PM Bainimarama and the "immigrant race" (the ethnic Indians). The letter is also addressed to the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and EU chiefs of mission, though most of them have not yet received it. The chiefs propose that the current situation is so dramatic a threat against traditional Fijian values that something has to give. They intend "to correct this anomaly once and for all"; but they are vague about how. They seek foreign-governments' "intervention." We comment that, to an extent, Bainimarama has targeted problems in the chiefly system that merit correcting; however, the chiefs' anguish is no surprise, given the derision Bainimarama has shown and the ethnic-Fijian fears of domination by ethnic-Indians. While the U.S. and others have pressed hard for a return to democracy in Fiji ASAP, the foreign governments have not suggested they would preemptively intervene militarily for democracy, let alone to defend the traditional chiefly system, which presumably is what the chiefs are seeking. End summary.

High Chiefs seek foreign intervention

2. (C) Over the weekend, we received a letter dated March 20, 2008, from three of the highest chiefs of Fiji, the heads of the Burebasaga and Tovata confederacies (Ro Tememu Kepa and Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu) and a serious claimant to head the Kubuna confederacy (Adi Samanunu Cakobau). The letter was hand-delivered by a contact of the Ambassador and is stamped "Private and Confidential." Given the incendiary content if made public in Fiji, we agree with the drafters that "confidential" is the appropriate classification. The letter is addressed to the chiefs of mission for the UK, U.S., Australia, New Zealand, and the EU. The Aussies received their copy a week ago. The others reportedly have not received theirs yet.

3. (C) The letter is an appeal to "our friends to prevent imminent chaos and civil strife" in Fiji. It notes that the UK brought in an "immigrant race" (Indian indentured servants) during the colonial period, and says after ethnic Fijians allowed them to remain "as our guests," the immigrants have come to believe their economic interests are "justifiable ground to claim political superiority...." The chiefs write: "It is therefore our intention now to correct

this anomaly once and for all...Otherwise, we the Fijian people and our descendants stand to lose our inheritance forever." The letter says interim PM Bainimarama "has embarked on a course of action calculated to bring to its knees the pillars of our traditional society," and lists several grievances: attempting to neutralize total Fijian control of native land; systematically dismantling the Great Council of Chiefs; abusing military power, making unlawful arrests, etc., that have resulted in death for some Fijian youths; planning an investigation of indigenous churches; refusing to consult; intending to stay in power for a long time; and causing economic decline. The chiefs conclude:

"We have, with extreme patience, witnessed the erosion of our way of life; such patience now has given rise to apprehension for our people who may not be able to withstand the degradation."

"It is therefore with a deep sense of fore-boding (sic) that we seek your intervention, not for our own survival but because of the deep and real concern for the future Fijian generation of this country who will one day be subjugated by others on account of our generosity."

Comment

14. (C) As previously reported, Bainimarama has repeatedly attacked Fiji's chiefly system and has targeted it for drastic "reforms." Some of his criticisms highlight long-standing problems that merit attention. Still it is no surprise that traditionalist ethnic Fijians are upset by the effort to subvert central elements of their lives; and no doubt many ethnic Fijians fear being dominated by the

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ethnic-Indian community. The letter, which appears genuine, confirms that the most senior Fijian chiefs believe their traditional system is under severe threat from Bainimarama and "the immigrant race." The letter suggests, as we have heard, that at least some important chiefs expect/fear that ethnic Fijians will seek to remove Bainimarama's interim government by force. There are rumors that some key chiefs have been plotting a counter-coup. Direct action against the military, which has nearly all the guns, would likely be bloody. While the military is close to 100% ethnic Fijian; thus far it has not split asunder over the high chiefs' repeated public complaints.

15. (C) The letter's plea for foreign-governments' "intervention" is vague; but if made public it would feed into Bainimarama's warnings, reiterated recently, that Australia, and perhaps others, have plans to invade. All the chiefly letter's addressees have pressed Bainimarama and his interim government to return Fiji to democracy ASAP, without threatening force. Such vocal international pressure presumably was one trigger for the chiefs' letter. Assuming the request is for force, it is very difficult to envision a circumstance in which the United States or any of the other addressees would preemptively "intervene" militarily. None have been prepared to do so to defend Fiji's democratic aspirations, let alone to preserve the traditional chiefly system. It is conceivable that foreign governments might have to "intervene" to protect foreign citizens if an attempt to remove Bainimarama and his group triggers civil war. But being prepared for a worst-case contingency is one thing; accepting the chiefs' invitation to "intervene" preemptively is quite another. Unless otherwise advised, we do not intend to respond to the letter.

DINGER